CHAPTER IX. NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL.

I POINTED to the writing in the sketch book, and looked at my mother. I was not mistaken. She had seen it, as I had seen it. But she refused to acknowledge that anything had happened to alarm her--plainly as I could detect it in her face.

"Somebody has been playing a trick on you, George," she said.

I made no reply. It was needless to say anything. My poor mother was evidently as far from being satisfied with her own shallow explanation as I was. The carriage waited for us at the door. We set forth in silence on our drive home.

The sketch-book lay open on my knee. My eyes were fastened on it; my mind was absorbed in recalling the moment when the apparition beckoned me into the summer-house and spoke. Putting the words and the writing together, the conclusion was too plain to be mistaken. The woman whom I had saved from drowning had need of me again.

And this was the same woman who, in her own proper person, had not hesitated to seize the first opportunity of leaving the house in which we had been sheltered together--without stopping to say one grateful word to the man who had preserved her from death! Four days only had elapsed since she had left me, never (to all appearance) to see me again. And now the ghostly apparition of her had returned as to a tried and trusted friend; had commanded me to remember her and to go to her; and had provided against all possibility of my memory playing me false, by writing the words which invited me to meet her "when the full moon shone on Saint Anthony's Well."

What had happened in the interval? What did the supernatural manner of her communication with me mean? What ought my next course of action to be?

My mother roused me from my reflections. She stretched out her hand, and suddenly closed the open book on my knee, as if the sight of the writing in it were unendurable to her.

"Why don't you speak to me, George?" she said. "Why do you keep your thoughts to yourself?"

"My mind is lost in confusion," I answered. "I can suggest nothing and explain nothing. My thoughts are all bent on the one question of what I am to do next. On that point I believe I may say that my mind is made up." I touched the sketch-book as I spoke. "Come what may of it," I said, "I mean to keep the appointment."

My mother looked at me as if she doubted the evidence of her own senses.

"He talks as if it were a real thing!" she exclaimed. "George, you don't really believe that you saw somebody in the summer-house? The place was empty. I tell you positively, when you pointed into the summer-house, the place was empty. You have been thinking and thinking of this woman till you persuade yourself that you have actually seen her."

I opened the sketch-book again. "I thought I saw her writing on this page," I answered. "Look at it, and tell me if I was wrong."

My mother refused to look at it. Steadily as she persisted in taking the rational view, nevertheless the writing frightened her.

"It is not a week yet," she went on, "since I saw you lying between life and death in your bed at the inn. How can you talk of keeping the appointment, in your state of health? An appointment with a shadowy Something in your own imagination, which appears and disappears, and leaves substantial writing behind it! It's ridiculous, George; I wonder you can help laughing at yourself."

She tried to set the example of laughing at me--with the tears in her eyes, poor soul! as she made the useless effort. I began to regret having opened my mind so freely to her.

"Don't take the matter too seriously, mother," I said. "Perhaps I may not be able to find the place. I never heard of Saint Anthony's Well; I have not the least idea where it is. Suppose I make the discovery, and suppose the journey turns out to be an easy one, would you like to go with me?"

"God forbid" cried my mother, fervently. "I will have nothing to do with it, George. You are in a state of delusion; I shall speak to the doctor."

"By all means, my dear mother. Mr. MacGlue is a sensible person. We pass his house on our way home, and we will ask him to dinner. In the meantime, let us say no more on the subject till we see the doctor."

I spoke lightly, but I really meant what I said. My mind was sadly disturbed; my nerves were so shaken that the slightest noises on the road startled me. The opinion of a man like Mr. MacGlue, who looked at all mortal matters from the same immovably practical point of view, might really have its use, in my case, as a species of moral remedy.

We waited until the dessert was on the table, and the servants had left the dining-room. Then I told my story to the Scotch doctor as I have told it here; and, that done, I opened the sketch-book to let him see the writing for himself.

Had I turned to the wrong page?

I started to my feet, and held the book close to the light of the lamp that hung over the dining table. No: I had found the right page. There was my half-finished drawing of the waterfall--but where were the two lines of writing beneath?

Gone!

I strained my eyes; I looked and looked. And the blank white paper looked back at me.

I placed the open leaf before my mother. "You saw it as plainly as I did," I said. "Are my own eyes deceiving me? Look at the bottom of the page."

My mother sunk back in her chair with a cry of terror.

"Gone?" I asked.

"Gone!"

I turned to the doctor. He took me completely by surprise. No incredulous smile appeared on his face; no jesting words passed his lips. He was listening to us attentively. He was waiting gravely to hear more.

"I declare to you, on my word of honor," I said to him, "that I saw the apparition writing with my pencil at the bottom of that page. I declare that I took the book in my hand, and saw these words written in it, 'When the full moon shines on Saint Anthony's Well.' Not more than three hours have passed since that time; and, see for yourself, not a vestige of the writing remains."

"Not a vestige of the writing remains," Mr. MacGlue repeated, quietly.

"If you feel the slightest doubt of what I have told you," I went on, "ask my mother; she will bear witness that she saw the writing too."

"I don't doubt that you both saw the writing," answered Mr. MacGlue, with a composure that surprised me.

"Can you account for it?" I asked.

"Well," said the impenetrable doctor, "if I set my wits at work, I believe I might account for it to the satisfaction of some people. For example, I might give you what they call the rational explanation, to begin with. I might say that you are, to my certain knowledge, in a highly excited nervous condition; and that, when you saw the apparition (as you call it), you simply saw nothing but your own strong impression of an absent woman, who (as I greatly fear) has got on the weak or amatory side of you. I mean no offense, Mr. Germaine--"

"I take no offense, doctor. But excuse me for speaking plainly--the rational explanation is thrown away on me."

"I'll readily excuse you," answered Mr. MacGlue; "the rather that I'm entirely of your opinion. I don't believe in the rational explanation myself."

This was surprising, to say the least of it. "What do you believe in?" I inquired.

Mr. MacGlue declined to let me hurry him.

"Wait a little," he said. "There's the irrational explanation to try next. Maybe it will fit itself to the present state of your mind better than the other. We will say this time that you have really seen the ghost (or double) of a living person. Very good. If you can suppose a disembodied spirit to appear in earthly clothing--of silk or merino, as the case may be--it's no great stretch to suppose, next, that this same spirit is capable of holding a mortal pencil, and of writing mortal words in a mortal sketching-book. And if the ghost vanishes (which your ghost did), it seems supernaturally appropriate that the writing should follow the example and vanish too. And the reason of the vanishment may be (if you want a reason), either that the ghost does not like letting a stranger like me into its secrets, or that vanishing is a settled habit of ghosts and of everything associated with them, or that this ghost has changed its mind in the course of three hours (being the ghost of a woman, I

am sure that's not wonderful), and doesn't care to see you 'when the full moon shines on Saint Anthony's Well.' There's the irrational explanation for you. And, speaking for myself, I'm bound to add that I don't set a pin's value on that explanation either."

Mr. MacGlue's sublime indifference to both sides of the question began to irritate me.

"In plain words, doctor," I said, "you don't think the circumstances that I have mentioned to you worthy of serious investigation?"

"I don't think serious investigation capable of dealing with the circumstances," answered the doctor. "Put it in that way, and you put it right. Just look round you. Here we three persons are alive and hearty at this snug table. If (which God forbid!) good Mistress Germaine or yourself were to fall down dead in another moment, I, doctor as I am, could no more explain what first principle of life and movement had been suddenly extinguished in you than the dog there sleeping on the hearth-rug. If I am content to sit down ignorant in the face of such an impenetrable mystery as this--presented to me, day after day, every time I see a living creature come into the world or go out of it--why may I not sit down content in the face of your lady in the summer-house, and say she's altogether beyond my fathoming, and there is an end of her?"

At those words my mother joined in the conversation for the first time.

"Ah, sir," she said, "if you could only persuade my son to take your sensible view, how happy I should be! Would you believe it?--he positively means (if he can find the place) to go to Saint Anthony's Well!"

Even this revelation entirely failed to surprise Mr. MacGlue.

"Ay, ay. He means to keep his appointment with the ghost, does he? Well, I can be of some service to him if he sticks to his resolution. I can tell him of another man who kept a written appointment with a ghost, and what came of it."

This was a startling announcement. Did he really mean what he said?

"Are you in jest or in earnest?" I asked.

"I never joke, sir," said Mr. MacGlue. "No sick person really believes in a doctor who jokes. I defy you to show me a man at the head of our profession

who has ever been discovered in high spirits (in medical hours) by his nearest and dearest friend. You may have wondered, I dare say, at seeing me take your strange narrative as coolly as I do. It comes naturally, sir. Yours is not the first story of a ghost and a pencil that I have heard."

"Do you mean to tell me," I said, "that you know of another man who has seen what I have seen?"

"That's just what I mean to tell you," rejoined the doctor. "The man was a far-away Scots cousin of my late wife, who bore the honorable name of Bruce, and followed a seafaring life. I'll take another glass of the sherry wine, just to wet my whistle, as the vulgar saying is, before I begin. Well, you must know, Bruce was mate of a bark at the time I'm speaking of, and he was on a voyage from Liverpool to New Brunswick. At noon one day, he and the captain, having taken their observation of the sun, were hard at it below, working out the latitude and longitude on their slates. Bruce, in his cabin, looked across through the open door of the captain's cabin opposite. 'What do you make it, sir?' says Brace. The man in the captain's cabin looked up. And what did Bruce see? The face of the captain? Devil a bit of it--the face of a total stranger! Up jumps Bruce, with his heart going full gallop all in a moment, and searches for the captain on deck, and finds him much as usual, with his calculations done, and his latitude and longitude off his mind for the day. 'There's somebody at your des k, sir,' says Bruce. 'He's writing on your slate; and he's a total stranger to me.' 'A stranger in my cabin?' says the captain. 'Why, Mr. Bruce, the ship has been six weeks out of port. How did he get on board?' Bruce doesn't know how, but he sticks to his story. Away goes the captain, and bursts like a whirlwind into his cabin, and finds nobody there. Bruce himself is obliged to acknowledge that the place is certainly empty. 'If I didn't know you were a sober man,' says the captain, 'I should charge you with drinking. As it is, I'll hold you accountable for nothing worse than dreaming. Don't do it again, Mr. Bruce.' Bruce sticks to his story; Bruce swears he saw the man writing on the captain's slate. The captain takes up the slate and looks at it. 'Lord save us and bless us!' says he; 'here the writing is, sure enough!' Bruce looks at it too, and sees the writing as plainly as can be, in these words: 'Steer to the nor'-west.' That, and no more.--Ah, goodness me, narrating is dry work, Mr. Germaine. With your leave, I'll take another drop of the sherry wine.

"Well (it's fine old wine, that; look at the oily drops running down the glass)--well, steering to the north-west, you will understand, was out of the captain's course. Nevertheless, finding no solution of the mystery on board the ship, and the weather at the time being fine, the captain determined, while the daylight lasted, to alter his course, and see what came of it.

Toward three o'clock in the afternoon an iceberg came of it; with a wrecked ship stove in, and frozen fast to the ice; and the passengers and crew nigh to death with cold and exhaustion. Wonderful enough, you will say; but more remains behind. As the mate was helping one of the rescued passengers up the side of the bark, who should he turn out to be but the very man whose ghostly appearance Bruce had seen in the captain's cabin writing on the captain's slate! And more than that--if your capacity for being surprised isn't clean worn out by this time--the passenger recognized the bark as the very vessel which he had seen in a dream at noon that day. He had even spoken of it to one of the officers on board the wrecked ship when he woke. 'We shall be rescued to-day,' he had said; and he had exactly described the rig of the bark hours and hours before the vessel herself hove in view. Now you know, Mr. Germaine, how my wife's far-away cousin kept an appointment with a ghost, and what came of it."*

Concluding his story in these words, the doctor helped himself to another glass of the "sherry wine." I was not satisfied yet; I wanted to know more.

"The writing on the slate," I said. "Did it remain there, or did it vanish like the writing in my book?"

Mr. MacGlue's answer disappointed me. He had never asked, and had never heard, whether the writing had remained or not. He had told me all that he knew, and he had but one thing more to say, and that was in the nature of a remark with a moral attached to it. "There's a marvelous resemblance, Mr. Germaine, between your story and Bruce's story. The main difference, as I see it, is this. The passenger's appointment proved to be the salvation of a whole ship's company. I very much doubt whether the lady's appointment will prove to be the salvation of You."

I silently reconsidered the strange narrative which had just been related to me. Another man had seen what I had seen--had done what I proposed to do! My mother noticed with grave displeasure the strong impression which Mr. MacGlue had produced on my mind.

"I wish you had kept your story to yourself, doctor," she said, sharply.

"May I ask why, madam?"

"You have confirmed my son, sir, in his resolution to go to Saint Anthony's Well."

Mr. MacGlue quietly consulted his pocket almanac before he replied.

"It's the full moon on the ninth of the month," he said. "That gives Mr. Germaine some days of rest, ma'am, before he takes the journey. If he travels in his own comfortable carriage--whatever I may think, morally speaking, of his enterprise--I can't say, medically speaking, that I believe it will do him much harm."

"You know where Saint Anthony's Well is?" I interposed.

"I must be mighty ignorant of Edinburgh not to know that," replied the doctor.

"Is the Well in Edinburgh, then?"

"It's just outside Edinburgh--looks down on it, as you may say. You follow the old street called the Canongate to the end. You turn to your right past the famous Palace of Holyrood; you cross the Park and the Drive, and take your way upward to the ruins of Anthony's Chapel, on the shoulder of the hill--and there you are! There's a high rock behind the chapel, and at the foot of it you will find the spring they call Anthony's Well. It's thought a pretty view by moonlight; and they tell me it's no longer beset at night by bad characters, as it used to be in the old time."

My mother, in graver and graver displeasure, rose to retire to the drawing-room.

"I confess you have disappointed me," she said to Mr. MacGlue. "I should have thought you would have been the last man to encourage my son in an act of imprudence."

"Craving your pardon, madam, your son requires no encouragement. I can see for myself that his mind is made up. Where is the use of a person like me trying to stop him? Dear madam, if he won't profit by your advice, what hope can I have that he will take mine?"

Mr. MacGlue pointed this artful compliment by a bow of the deepest respect, and threw open the door for my mother to pass out.

When we were left together over our wine, I asked the doctor how soon I might safely start on my journey to Edinburgh.

"Take two days to do the journey, and you may start, if you're bent on it, at the beginning of the week. But mind this," added the prudent doctor,

"though I own I'm anxious to hear what comes of your expedition--understand at the same time, so far as the lady is concerned, that I wash my hands of the consequences."--

* The doctor's narrative is not imaginary. It will be found related in full detail, and authenticated by names and dates, in Robert Dale Owen's very interesting work called "Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World." The author gladly takes this opportunity of acknowledging his obligations to Mr. Owen's remarkable book.